



# Jesting Pilate

*Aldous Huxley*

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## **Jesting Pilate** Aldous Huxley

The author recounts his experiences traveling through six countries, and offers his observations on their people, cultures, and customs.

## **Jesting Pilate Details**

Date : Published July 17th 1994 by Da Capo Press (first published 1926)

ISBN : 9781569249314

Author : Aldous Huxley

Format : Paperback 326 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Cultural, India, Travel, Literature, Asia

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## From Reader Review Jestng Pilate for online ebook

### John says

I'd never tackled anything by this author, before picking up this series of essays at a used bookstore. Frankly, I preferred Evelyn Waugh's *Labels* (also "noted novelist as travel writer"), but Huxley's observations made for an interesting read.

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### Euzie says

If you ignore the outdated and casual racism (it is of it's time) it's a rather interesting jaunt through the Southern Hemisphere

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### Carl Mucho says

This book had to undergo emergency drying procedures after getting soaked in water inside a backpack I had washed. It took at least a day for the book's pages to wither crisp to perfection with the heat of the sun erasing all traces of the unfortunate incident. I had set aside the entire weekend to read the book but had to begin a day later as a result.

Aldous Huxley writes thought-provoking entry after mind-blowing entry of his travels across the vast expanse of Asia (South, IndoChina Southeast, East) to America. His eye for details, wide erudition and deep sociocultural awareness help transform the book into a pair of comfortable shoes that is easy to slip into. The experiences he had in his journey are easy to absorb as one's own. His uncanny powers of observation coupled with his skills in writing ensures that the reader enjoy the rush of traveling places thousands miles apart without moving an inch. Reading is the cheapest form of travel is an idiom that he enlivens with his travel memoirs.

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### Lachlan says

Amusing and insightful at various points. Huxley sure loves to have an opinion.

I can't help but find his contemptuous dismissal of the Taj pretty hilarious. At times he shows impressive self awareness (at least in terms of the era), though blind spots are clear to us reading 80+ years later. His elitist criticisms of democracy and popular taste are a little cringeworthy.

Loved the descriptions of India. How different to my experience. The most fully formed writing comes at the end in his bitter denunciations of America.

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### Ahimsa says

While I agree with Michael Palin's assessment that it's a strange choice of title, it's otherwise quite a fun read.

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The Imperialism is a bit hard to stomach, but as long you understand the whole "product of your time" concept it's not too tough to come to grips with.

In 1926, Huxley visited Indian, Burma, Malaya, Japan, China, and America--all places I have been (though China just the airports) on this trip. Reading old travel writing is cool because while some things have entirely changed, more than you'd expect are still the same. (Or same-same, as they say here.) I would rank it as one of the best travel books I've ever read, less so for the countries he visited and more for his perceptive insight and evocative writing.

After spending three days at a political campaign, he reveals how useless he finds it all.

*Personally I have little use for political speaking. If I know something about the question at issue, I find it quite unnecessary to listen to an orator who repeats in a summarized, and generally garbled, from the information I already possess; knowing what I do, I am quite capable of making up my own mind on the subject under discussion without listening to his rhetorical persuasions. If, on the other hand, I know nothing, it is not to the public speaker that I turn for the information on which to base my judgment. The acquisition of full and accurate knowledge about any given subject is a lengthy and generally boring process, entailing the reading of many books, the collating of numerous opinions. It therefore follows, inevitably, that the imparting of knowledge can never be part of a public speaker's work, for the simple reason that if his speeches are boring and lengthy--and boring and lengthy they must be, if he is to give anything like a fair and full account of the facts--nobody will listen to him.*

At times his writing is wonderfully vivid, transporting the reader to the scene. Consider this, for instance.

*It took the Tartar traders six weeks of walking to get from Kashgar to Srinagar. They start in the early autumn when the passes are still free from the snow and rivers, swollen in summer by its melting, have subsided to fordableness. They walk into Kashmir, and from Kashmir into India. They spend the winter in India, sell what they have brought, and in the following spring, when the passes are once more open, go back into Turkestan with a load of Indian fabrics, velvet and plush and ordinary cotton, which they sell for fabulous profit.*

Or this:

*Or journey from Penang to Singapore bean at night. We were carried in darkness through the invisible forest. The noise of the insects among the trees was like an escape of steam. It pierced the roaring of the train as a needle might pierce butter. I had though man pre-eminent at least in the art of noise making. But a thousand equatorial cicadas could shout down a steel works; and with reinforcements they would be a match for machine guns.*

After a sentence with a blind assessment that democracy was the best end case scenario, Huxley checks himself. (Note the bit about the Hapsburgs is often true too of former Soviet Republics.) All one paragraph in the book, I have inserted some section breaks to make it more readable.

*The implication of course is that democracy is something excellent, an ideal to be passionately wished for. But after all is democracy really desirable. European nations certainly do not seem to be finding it so at the moment. And even self-determination is not so popular as it was. There are plenty of places in what was once the Austrian Empire where the years of Hapsburg tyranny are remembered as a golden age, and the old bureaucracy is sincerely regretted.*

*And what is democracy, anyhow? Can it be said that government by the people exists anywhere, except perhaps in Switzerland Certainly, the English parliamentary system cannot be described as government by the people. It is a government by oligarchs for the people and with the people's occasional advice. Do I mean*

*anything whatever when I say that democracy is a good thing? Am I expressing a reasoned opinion? Or do I merely repeat a meaningless formula by force of habit because it was drummed into me at an early age? I wonder.*

*And that I am able to wonder with such a perfect detachment is due, of course, to the fact that I was born in the upper-middle, governing class of an independent, rich, and exceedingly powerful nation. Born an Indian or brought up in the slums of London, I should hardly be able to achieve so philosophical a suspense of judgment.*

His vagabonding nature is made clear in the following paragraphs. Huxley's perambulations are not what he is famous for, but books like *Island of Brave New World* couldn't have been written by someone who traveled frequently.

*I have always felt a passion for personal freedom. It is a passion which the profession of writing has enabled me to gratify. A writer is his own master, works when and where he will, and is paid by a quite impersonal entity, the public, with whom it is unnecessary for him to have any direct dealings whatever.*

*Professionally free, I have taken care not to encumber myself with the shackles that tie a man down to one particular plot of ground; I own nothing, nothing beyond a few books and the motorcar which enables me to move from one encampment to another.*

*It is pleasant to be free, when one has enough to do and think about to prevent one's ever being bored, when one's work is agreeable and seems (pleasing illusion!) worth while, when one has a clear conception of what one desires to achieve and enough strength of mind to keep one more or less undeviatingly, on the path that leads to this goal. It is pleasant to be free. But occasionally, I must confess, I regret the chains with which I have not loaded myself. In these moods I desire a house full of stuff, a plot of land with things growing on it; I feel that I should like to know one small place and its people intimately, that I should like to have known them for years, all my life. But one cannot be two incompatible things at the same time. If one desires freedom, one must sacrifice the advantages of being bound. It is, alas, only too obvious.*

Upon ruminating on the theory that life is found everywhere--plants, minerals, etc. (Of course, his conclusion is much broader and refers to a root cause of much of the problems of the world--uniformed habit and customs.)

*To deny life to matter and concentrate only on its measurable qualities was a sound policy that paid by results. No wonder we made a habit of it. Habits easily become a part of us. We take them for granted, as we take for granted our hands and feet, the sun, falling downstairs instead of up, colours and sounds. To break a physical habit may be as painful as an amputation; to question the usefulness of an old-established habit of thought is felt to be an outrage, an indecency, a horrible sacrilege.*

His feeling upon leaving India are shared by many travelers, myself included.

*I am glad to be leaving India. I have met old friends...and made new friends; I have seen many delightful and interesting things, much beauty, much that is strange, much that is grotesque and comical. Bt all the same I am glad to be going away. The reasons are purely selfish. What the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve over. It is because I do not desire to grieve that I am glad to be going. For India is depressing as no other country I have ever known. One breathes in it, not air, but dust and hopelessness.*

In a section that feels surprisingly contemporary, he discusses that holiest of traveler grails--getting Off the Beaten Path.

*Every tourist is haunted by the desire to "get off the Beaten Track." He wants, in the first place, to do*

*something which other people have not done. The longing to be in some way or other unique grows with every increase of standardisation. ... The tourist is like the reader of advertisements. He wants something for his money which no one else possesses....*

*But it is not alone to desire to achieve uniqueness that makes the tourist so anxious to leave the Beaten Track. It is not the anticipated pleasure of boasting about his achievements. The incorrigible romantic in every one of us believes, with a faith that is proof against all disappointments, that there is always something more remarkable off the Beaten Track than on it, that the things which it is difficult and troublesome to see must for that very reason be the most worth seeing.*

He goes on in greater detail and while it's too long to quote, it's well worth reading. Later in the book, after describing how awful Hollywood movies are, and marveling that the very viewing of them didn't cause instant revolution among oppressed third-world nations, Huxley uncorks this gem.

*A people whose own propagandists proclaim it to be mentally and morally deficient cannot expect to be looked up to.*

Sad to say, the entertainment industry has only become far more stupid in the last 80 years. He then describes a situation that every reader is familiar with.

*At sea I succumbed to my besetting vice of reading: to such an extent that the sand-fringed palm-crowned islands; the immense marmoreal clouds that seem for ever poised, a sculptor's delirium, on the dividing line between chaos and accomplished form, the sunsets of Bengal lights and emeralds, of primroses and ice-cream, of blood and lamplblack; the dawns when an almost inky sea reflecting the Eastern roses from its blue-black surface, turns the colour of wine; the stars in the soot-black sky, the nightly flashing of far away storms beneath the horizon, the green phosphorescence on the water--all the lovely incidents of tropical seafaring float slowly past me, almost unobserved; I am absorbed in the ship's library.*

And then amid what we'd now call beach reads, which he flew through at three per day, he discovers a copy of Henry Ford's *My Life and Work*. The genesis of *Brave New World* is apparent from the beginning.

*I had never read it; I began and was fascinated. It is enough in a book to apply destructive common sense to the existing fabric of social organisation and then, with the aid of constructive common sense, to build up the scattered pieces into a more seemly whole. ... But when Ford started to apply common sense to the existing methods of industry and business he did it, not a book, but real life....Ford seems a greater man than Buddha.*

Ruminating on the even then strong appeal of Buddhism in the West, Huxley states:

*One is all for religion until one visits a really religious country.*

One could disagree with the first part of that clause, but the point is well made. Hinduism gets a pass from most anti-religious, but the caste system is as terrible as any custom currently extant in the world.

Later he stops in the port town of Miri, where live pigs are unloaded for the benefit of Chinese immigrant labor. To get the pigs to chill out, Huxley reveals that they receive opium in their breakfast the morning of the delivery.

Upon landing in Manila...

*I had been interviewed by nine reporters...I was asked what I thought of Manila, of the Filipino race, of the political problems of the islands--to which I could only reply by asking my interviewers what they thought*

*about these subjects and assuring them, when they had told me, that I thought the same. My opinions were considered by all parties to be extraordinarily sound.*

Upon arriving in Japan he comments on what was even then an expensive country.

*Accustomed to deploring and at the same time taking advantage of the low standards of living current elsewhere in the East, the traveller who enters Japan is rudely surprised when he finds himself asked to pay ... a wage which would not be despised in Europe.... I was glad, for sake of the rickshaw coolies, that it should be so; for my own, I must confess, I was sorry. To the slave-owners, slaver seems a most delightful institution.*

Now to America, where he dallies on film sets in Hollywood and travels through Chicago onto New York. His thoughts on America show that it has changed far more than the East Asian countries that make up the bulk of his journey and book. I wonder what three words we'd use now. Almost certainly none of the ones he has chosen.

*Now that liberty is out of date, equality an exploded notion and fraternity a proven impossibility, republics should change their mottoes. Intelligence, Sterility, Insolvency: that would do for contemporary France. But not for America. The American slogan would have to be something quite different. The national motto should fit the national facts. What I should write under America's flapping eagle would be: Vitality, Prosperity, Modernity.*

And finally, upon returning full circle to London, he shares a sentiment that if we all thought that way would make the world a much more pleasant place to live.

So the journey is over and I am back again where I started, richer by much experience and poorer by many exploded convictions, many perished certainties. For convictions and certainties are too often the concomitants of ignorance. Of knowledge and experience the fruit is generally doubt....

*I set out on my travels knowing, or thinking I knew, how men should live, how be governed, how educated, what they should believe. I knew which was the best form of social organisation and to what end societies had been created. I had my views on every activity of human life. Now, on my return, I find myself without any of these pleasing certainties...The better you understand the significance of any question, the more difficult it becomes to answer it.*

*Those who like to feel that they are always right and who attach a high importance to their own opinions should stay at home.*

*But proverbs are always platitudes until you have personally experience the truth of them.*

Jesting Pilate is dated, and Huxley uses some concepts and words that make a modern reader cringe (including frequent use of the word coolie and at least one instance of the n word.) Allowing for cultural context, however, there is so much greatness in this book, as many an inconsequential event leads to Huxley's thoughts on life, the universe, and everything. For anyone interested in travel, human nature, or the world at large this book is must-read material; a true classic of the genre.

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## Gwen Vandendriessche says

Pas tout récent: certains éléments ont vieilli, mais d'autres n'ont pas changé.

## **Peter Waller says**

Fascinating comments from travelling in 1924. Written with great insight and wit.

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## **Ensiform says**

A travel memoir, obviously. India takes up half the book, the other places the last half in rapid succession. No matter – the charm of the book is Huxley's superbly balanced, thoughtful insights on everything from the caste system to Christian persecution in history, from how practical matters shape the seriousness of sin to Hollywood pabulum to cultural differences in music appreciation.

A truly learned and reasonable man, Huxley is at turns inspiring, funny, admiring and scathing. His description of India is dead-on, and it exquisitely captures that mixture of pity, contempt, understanding and reverence that the open minded Westerner comes to feel for Indian life. The book is a wholly admirable exercise in the broadening of an already open mind.

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## **Mehdi says**

A funny, deeply insightful account of the author's travels through India, Southeast Asia and America. While this is technically a travel memoir, much of the writing is philosophical and showcases Huxley's humanist perspectives. A worthwhile read.

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## **Thomas says**

Oeuvre digne de figurer dans une hypothétique bibliothèque idéale. Avec ce même esprit critique et caustique qu'habitait un certain Albert Londres, Aldous Huxley, à travers ce "tour du monde d'un sceptique" publié en 1926, nous rappelle aussi, par la finesse de son regard et son style précieux, un autre brillant grand voyageur, le Suisse Nicolas Bouvier et son célèbre "L'usage du monde" (d'ailleurs publié chez le même éditeur). Ces voyages en Inde, en Malaisie, en Indonésie et au Japon ne constituent pourtant que l'arrière-plan d'un recueil de pensées humanistes et avant-gardistes, des idées d'autant plus réjouissantes qu'elles surgissent alors d'un humble esprit visionnaire à peine âgé de 32 ans. Il arrive parfois que l'auteur se trompe (notamment lorsqu'il aborde la peinture sous les tropiques), mais même alors ses nombreux aphorismes sonnent d'une incroyable justesse. Sa critique du joug anglais en terre indienne ne sombre pas dans un manichéisme facile, les paradoxes de l'Amérique joyeuse et puritaine sont délicieusement dépeints, la destruction des valeurs de la société moderne américaine judicieusement argumentée. Un exemple de ce caractère visionnaire ? "Partout sur le globe, les producteurs d'Hollywood sont les missionnaires et les agents de propagande de la civilisation blanche", une thèse largement développée dans un ouvrage publié plus de 80 ans plus tard, "Mainstream" de Frédéric Martel. Un ouvrage idéal qui accompagnera le voyageur en quête de pittoresque : "Il n'y a pas de touriste que ne hante le désir de 'sortir des sentiers battus'. D'abord parce qu'il veut faire quelque chose que les autres n'ont jamais fait. Le besoin d'être unique, d'une façon ou d'une autre, augmente au fur et à mesure de la standardisation". La conclusion, sous la forme du retour à Londres, est une véritable charte du Grand Voyageur : "revenu au point de départ, plus riche de beaucoup d'expériences, plus

pauvre de nombreuses convictions perdues, de beaucoup de certitudes détruites. Convictions et certitudes ne sont que trop souvent concomitantes de l'ignorance. Le fruit de la connaissance et de l'expérience est généralement le doute."

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### **Rohini Kamath says**

I read this book as a child from my grandfathers collection. A fantastic account of the authors travels in the sub-continent. Funny and insightful, it will keep you engrossed through out. Oddly, theres not much in the way of description of food while in India, though a description of a particularly large and satisfying meal is present in the Burma section.

I recently spent a month travelling in Rajasthan, and read the chapters pertaining to those areas while there and was surprised to see that many of his observations still hold true. ( Bikaner and his views on some of the palaces ). Anyone visiting Mumbai will agree with his observation of the crows.

Aldous Huxley has surprisingly modern views for a book written in 1914, as an Indian reading it, I found I agreed with him on nearly everything, including his views on the Taj Mahal. ( I may be in the minority there ).

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### **Thomas Burchfield says**

"Travel is cheap and rapid," writes Aldous Huxley in Jestng Pilate (first published in 1926) said by some to be the first of the "modern" travel adventures. "The immense accumulation of modern knowledge lies heaped on every side." (He should live so long, especially now.)

Huxley is best remembered as the author of Brave New World and The Doors of Perception, which is one of the first personal accounts of psychedelic usage (that other kind of travel).

Read the rest of my review at:

<http://tbdeluxe.blogspot.com/2015/09/travels-with-huxley-thoughts-on-jesting.html>

Thanks!

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